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Zasto: Belgrade and the remains of the NATO bombing

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Zasto: Belgrade and the remains of the NATO bombing

Abstract

The 1999 NATO bombings are an omnipresent specter in Belgrade. Nearly seventeen years after the bombings, all the buildings in the city center hit by air strikes still stand as stark daily reminders of the injury Serbs feel.

Keywords

Belgrade, nato, RTS, bombing, memorial, serbs

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Author Biography

Drew is a writer and researcher with a background in public corruption investigative journalism, feature writing, and television production. Drew lives in Belgrade, Serbia and is the managing editor of Belgrade Insight, a publication of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network.

The 1999 NATO bombings are an omnipresent specter in Belgrade. An international coalition force bombed military, communications, and transportation sites throughout Serbia for 78 days in the spring of 1999 to end Serbia's violent repression of the Albanian majority in Kosovo. Serb military, paramilitary and police forces were engaged in a widespread looting, deportation and, in some instances, mass killings throughout Kosovo and the bombing campaign was designed to force their withdrawal from Kosovo.

Serbia has long claimed Kosovo as the spiritual center of Serbian culture, but under socialist rule Kosovo was an autonomous region with a 90% Albanian majority. To bring Kosovo fully under Serbian control during the bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic pursued a policy of ethnic cleansing to expel the Albanian population.

According to NATO estimates, 1,500 Albanians were killed and somewhere between 400,00-600,000 Albanians were expelled from Kosovo during the Serb repression, although these numbers vary widely depending on who is counting. The Hague Tribunal later charged Milosevic and six other Serbs with committing war crimes in Kosovo. (Serbs are not alone in committing war crimes; Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) members have been charged by The Hague with mass killings, kidnapping, torture, rape and even organized organ trafficking.)

NATO targeted several key sites in Belgrade during the bombings to disrupt Serbian command and communications systems: the Army General Headquarters, the Air Force Headquarters, the Ministry of Police and the Radio Television Serbia (RTS) broadcasting headquarters. The Serbian government estimates that 2,500 people died and 12,500 were injured during the air attacks, but the exact number is still unknown.

The bombings had the intended effect; Serbia withdrew from Kosovo in June 1999. NATO installed a peacekeeping force after the withdrawal. Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, a declaration Serbia does not recognize. Today, it is impossible to avoid reminders of the bombings in Belgrade: ruined buildings are a part of the city's very bones, and the political issues surrounding the bombings- Kosovo independence specifically- are still very much front-page news. This ubiquity feels willful. Tourism books list the buildings as sightseeing stops and tour guides never miss a chance to mention "NATO aggression". It's a rare cab driver who doesn't bring up 1999 and conversations between locals and foreigners—no matter how friendly—invariably lead to the bombings.

The bombings, and the physical aftermath, are still an open wound cutting through the country. Nearly seventeen years later, all the buildings in the city center

hit by air strikes still stand as stark daily reminders of the humiliating injury Serbs feel.

For some Serbs today, the NATO bombings are a symbol of the injustice and enmity of the international community towards Serbia.

Annual commemorations, complete with live coverage and fiery political speeches, take place on the steps of the devastated former Yugoslav Army Headquarters.

At last year's 16th anniversary service, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksander Vucić said: "Today, in their name, we remember every bomb, every death, every piece of shrapnel, siren, fire, [bombed] bridge and [NATO] stealth plane. We remember, and all others should remember, that the Serbian memory is long and that we will never forget - none of the 78 days, none of the victims."

It's a memory seared into the city's skin.



BELGRADE- a child stands in front of the Memorial to Children in Belgrade's Tasmajdan Park. The monument lies in the center of the main pedestrian walkway in Belgrade's busiest park. One of Belgrade's busiest tourist attractions, St. Marko's Church, sits in the background. An estimated 80 children according to Serbian figures died during the bombing campaign. The inscription reads: We were just children (translated).

Radio Television Serbia and Tasmajdan Park Memorials

On a rainy January afternoon, those wounds are still clear. Plaques and memorials to victims, including one dedicated to children, of the bombings are scattered throughout the city's central Tasmajdan Park, a main pedestrian corridor, near the site of the *Radio-televizija Srbije* (RTS) building. A steady stream of families and couples stop to look at the memorials.

NATO controversially targeted the RTS headquarters on April 23, 1999, ostensibly to silence Serbian propaganda broadcasts, and sixteen technicians and staff employees were killed. The strike was ineffective at silencing Serb broadcasts because most media production had already moved to the countryside. The manager of the station was later sentenced to ten years in prison for not evacuating workers despite prior warning that the building was a target.



BELGRADE- A detail of the memorial to children killed during the 1999 NATO bombing campaign in Belgrade's Tasmajdan Park.



BELGRADE: A detail of the memorial to children killed during the 1999 NATO bombing campaign in Belgrade's Tasmajdan Park. Most accounts, official and informal, refer to the bombings as NATO aggression and rarely, if ever, mention Serb actions in Kosovo. One tour guide told a tour group that NATO bombed Serbia to "steal its natural resources."

The NATO bombings are widely seen as an unwarranted act of aggression by an interventionist, anti-Serb global community. At this year's commemoration, Prime Minister Aleksander Vucic called the bombings a "needless aggression against a small, free Balkan country... you were killing us, you were killing our children. but you didn't kill Serbia because no one can kill Serbia."



BELGRADE- The remains of the RTS building in central Belgrade. The buildings sit between Tasmajdan Park and the Children's Cultural Center and pedestrians unexpectedly encounter the ruins when passing between the two. Today, the offices surrounding the ruins are the fully functional headquarters of RTS. Employees, some who knew the victims of the bombings, park their cars in front of the ruins.



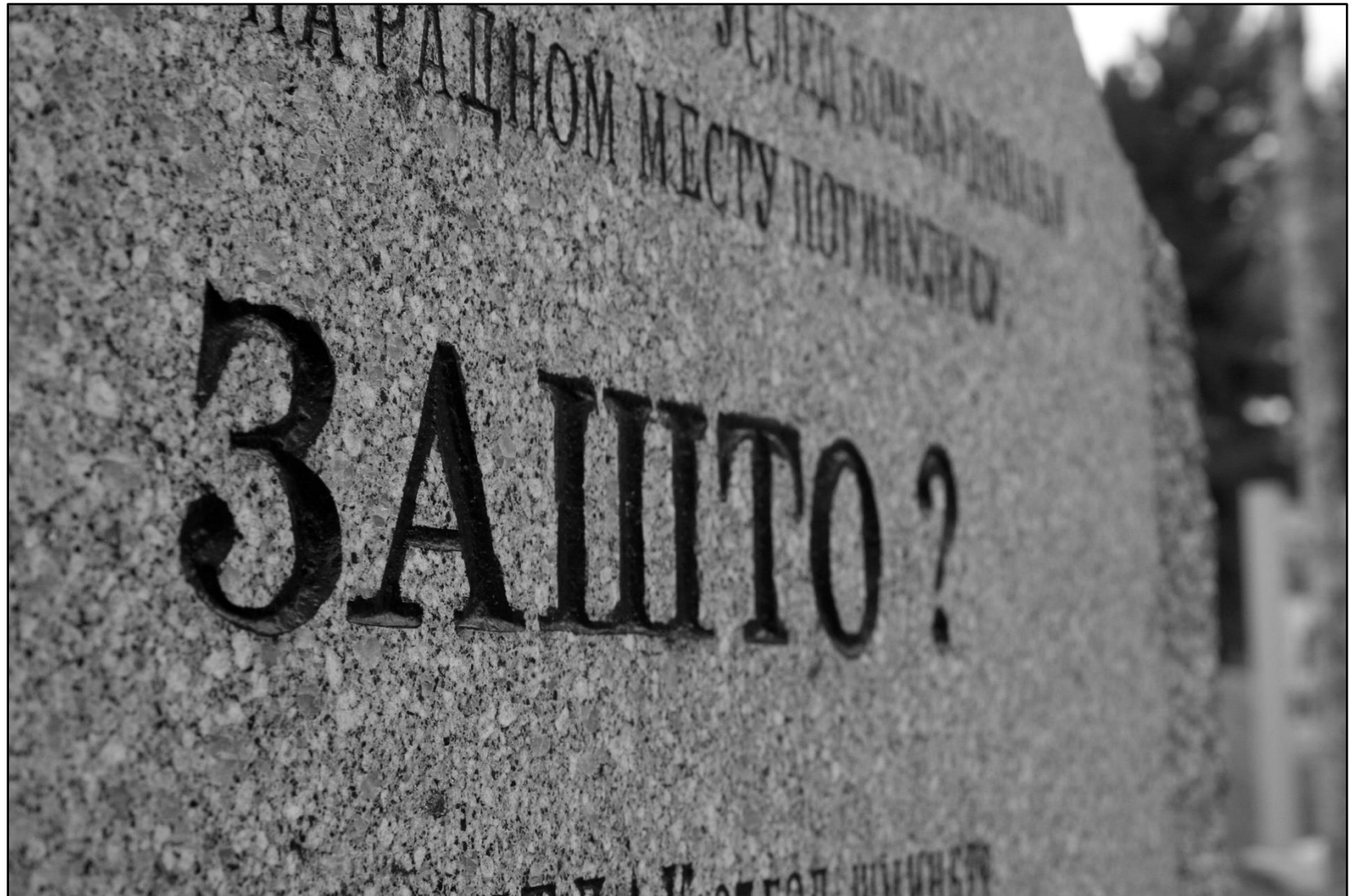
BELGRADE- A detail of the ruined remains of the RTS building in central Belgrade. There is no clear or official explanation of why the ruins still stand, especially since some construction work was done to shore the buildings up. Ask passersby and they will tell you that the buildings serve as a reminder for youth of what happened to Serbia.



BELGRADE- Women visit the memorial to RTS bombing victims titled: Zasto (Why)? in Belgrade's Tasmajdan Park. This is a site of active memorialization: a steady stream of people pause here and Belgraders regularly place mourning candles and flowers at the base of the memorial. The memorial is also a regular stop on guided tours. On one recent Saturday afternoon, three large groups stopped at the memorial within 30 minutes.



BELGRADE- Prayer candles in front of “Zasto (Why)?” memorial for RTS bombing victims in Belgrade’s Tasmajdan Park.



BELGRADE- Detail, Zasto (Why)? Memorial plaque in Belgrade's Tasmajdan park.



BELGRADE- Detail, Zasto (Why)? Memorial plaque in Belgrade's Tasmajdan park including images from the night of the bombing.



BELGRADE- Side view of the bombed out RTS building with memorial plaques for two of the victims whose bodies were never found in foreground. These headstones serve as their graves.



BELGRADE- Detail of the bombed RTS building in Belgrade's Tasmajdan park.



BELGRADE- A child plays in front of the bombed out RTS building in Belgrade. This is an example of the ubiquity and “everydayness” of the bombing remnants; this young boy was kicking a soccer ball around the parking lot while his mother loaded his baby brother into a stroller. This is a scene seen by many children throughout the day visiting the Children’s Culture Center.

Serbian Victim Memorial in front of Parliament

These banners, “commemorating forgotten Serb victims” were erected in June, 2015 during the run up to the 20th anniversary of the Srebrinica genocide.

Serbs often claim that international attention focuses solely on victims of Serb violence to the exclusion of Serb victims of violence. The most common refrain one will hear in Belgrade when talking about Serbian war crimes, or the 1990s wars, is: “what about the Serb victims?” This permanent memorial in front of the Serbian parliament building is a physical manifestation of Serbian narratives of victimhood.



BELGRADE- Banners commemorating and listing 1990s war and bombings victims in front of the Serbian Parliament building.



BELGRADE- Banner listing “victims of NATO and KLA aggression” in front of the Serbian Parliament building. There are 2,500 images of victims, including soldiers, men, women and children. These banners face one of Belgrade’s main streets and sit across from the main tourist sightseeing bus tours stop.

Yugoslav Army General Staff Headquarters

The matching pair of Army General Staff Headquarters buildings were bombed several times throughout the bombing campaign. Another high-visibility site, buildings sit on the main street into Belgrade from the airport and any visitor to the city center arriving from the airport will pass these buildings.

Reconstruction and demolition began in the summer of 2015. Plans include completely demolishing one of the buildings and rehabbing the other. Annual commemorations are often held on the steps of the building.



BELGRADE- A multistory military recruiting billboard covering the front of the bomb-damaged former Yugoslav Army Headquarters in central Belgrade. While officially militarily neutral, Serbia has recently signed controversial cooperation agreements with NATO.



BELGRADE- A street view of the bombed out former Yugoslav Army Headquarters building in central Belgrade. Demolition and reconstruction on the building, often the site of public memorial services, began in fall 2015.



BELGRADE-detail of the former Yugoslav Army Headquarter ruins in central Belgrade.



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